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SUBJECT: TURKEY: PREMIER THINK TANK ASAM CLOSES ITS DOORS

Classified By: POL Counselor Daniel O'Grady, for reasons 1.4 (b,d)

11. (C) Summary and Comment: One of Turkey's premier think tanks the Eurasian Strategic Research Center (ASAM) unexpectedly closed in November after losing its main corporate sponsor. The Ulker Group pulled its funding on short notice. While neither ASAM nor Ulker have publicly addressed the reasons behind the decision, many point to increasing tensions between ASAM's staunchly secular leadership (composed of retired generals and ambassadors) and the Islamic-leaning ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). One former ASAM analyst told us Prime Minister Erdogan pushed Ulker to fire ASAM's President former Ambassador Logoglu due to Logoglu's increasingly public disapproval of the Erdogan administration. ASAM's closure has sent shock waves through Turkey's diplomatic and think tank community. Some analysts see this as a blow to intellectual freedom in Turkey. Harsher critics claim that by quieting ASAM, the AKP has further consolidated its power base and sent a strong message to those who would challenge its policies. End Summary and Comment.

12. (C) To the shock of the Turkish intellectual community, and the diplomats with whom it engages, one of Turkey's top think tanks ASAM closed without fanfare or public announcement. Boasting strong ties to the highly-secular Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Turkish General Staff, ASAM employed a cadre of retired ambassadors and generals including ASAM President former Ambassador to the U.S. Faruk Logoglu and Executive Board Member former Deputy Chief of Defense GEN Edip Baser, both renowned critics of the Islamic-leaning ruling AKP. The Turkish press reported the Eurasia One Foundation, sponsored by the conservative food manufacturer the Ulker Group, pulled its funding for the think tank on short notice.

13. (C) The exact reason for ASAM's closure remains murky; neither ASAM's leadership nor Ulker have spoken openly about the decision. Chairman of the MFA-funded Middle East Research Center and former ASAM analyst Hasan Kanbolal told us that the Eurasia One Foundation faxed an after-hours memo to ASAM releasing Logoglu and the executive board from their duties and informing the staff that the think tank would be restructured. The foundation subsequently fired all ASAM personnel and paid severance packages. The think tank still exists on paper under the supervision of Ulker's new foundation the Eurasia Turkish Cultural Strategic Research Foundation (AVSAV), whose executive board reportedly includes Prime Ministry Senior Foreign Policy Advisor Ahmet Davutoglu, former Nationalist Action Party (MHP) MP Murat Sokmenoglu, former Democratic Society Party (DYP) MP Saffet Beduk, and other center right politicians close to Ulker.

14. (C) Critics assert that ASAM was closed due to AKP pressure. Kanbolal said Erdogan reportedly told Ulker chairman Murat Ulker that he "felt uneasy" with Logoglu, adding the staunchly secular retired Ambassador had thumbed his nose at the Prime Minister one too many times. Kanbolal pointed to two recent events that had escalated existing tensions. At a breakfast hosted by the French Ambassador, Logoglu had reportedly made an open statement that Turkey is under Islamic rule. He also reportedly hosted a dinner party for several key Erdogan opponents, where jokes made at the Prime Minister's expense eventually found their way into the press. However, the Islamist media reported Ulker made its decision to close the expensive think tank due to the global economic crisis. "Today's Zaman" characterized ASAM as the "rich think tank" where senior staff were paid in dollars and issued private cars. ASAM's failure to diversify its financial base left it dependent on Ulker's funding for 90 percent of its budget, a reliance which in retrospect seems unhealthy and which certainly led to its untimely and unfortunate demise.

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